

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

011227Z Sep 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001593

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL
NSC FOR DAVID MERKEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIA: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PASSES CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENTS

REF: A) YEREVAN 1566 B) YEREVAN 1352 C) YEREVAN 1290

Classified By: Ambassador John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The Armenian National Assembly passed the proposed package of constitutional amendments on September 1, triggering a series of procedural steps that include a final, pro forma vote tentatively scheduled for mid- to late-September, and a referendum in November. Opposition leaders suspended their 18-month boycott of Parliament to participate in the first days of the session, but walked out before the final vote. In a series of monologues, opposition members vowed to campaign against the amendments in advance of the referendum. The extraordinary session heightened our concerns that, despite our efforts, the Armenian political elite -- both the governing coalition and the opposition -- is not yet ready to join forces in support of the improved basic law. End Summary.

PARLIAMENT MOVES AMENDMENTS PACKAGE TO THIRD READING

12. (U) On September 1, the Armenian National Assembly approved the proposed package of constitutional amendments without significant changes to the Council of Europe (CoE) Venice Commission-approved text. The package next moves to the third reading in mid- to late-September and then to a referendum in November. The amendments cleared the 131-member Armenian National Assembly with 98 votes. One member, independent MP Manouk Gasparyan, abstained.

REFERENDUM: OPPOSITION VOWS TO CAMPAIGN AGAINST AMENDMENTS

13. (C) Opposition leaders suspended their 18-month boycott of Parliament to participate in the August 29 through September 1 session (ref A), but walked out before the final vote. Justice Bloc leader Stepan Demirchian said the Kocharian Administration's "penchant for clinging to power," and not the current constitution, is Armenia's major obstacle to democratization. "The constitution has no provision that requires ballot box stuffing, election fraud and repression," he noted. National Unity Party leader Artashes Geghamyan said that "disregard for the current constitution" has led to "widespread popular distrust and discontent." Government authorities, according to Demirchian and Geghamyan, have repeatedly violated the existing constitution, which already guarantees free elections, human rights, and the rule of law. "What makes these amendments different?" Demirchian asked. Both leaders said they would campaign against the amendments before the referendum.

AMENDMENTS ON THE WAY TO REFERENDUM

14. (C) In a cryptic description of the legislative process, National Assembly Deputy Chairman Tigran Torosian told members that drafters of the constitutional amendments may need to make changes to the approved text "beyond technical corrections" before the third reading of the amendments package. Torosian's comments sparked protests from members, including United Labor Party MP Grigor Ghoujeyan, who said he believed that the ruling coalition would attempt to substitute last-minute changes (in violation of parliamentary rules) to drastically change the intent of the amendments. Presidential Assistant Armen Haroutunyan urged opposition members to "just be smart and use this chance, because it doesn't happen often that a President acts to limit his own powers."

COMMENT: A LONG ROAD TO THE BALLOT BOX

15. (C) The extraordinary session once again exacerbated concerns that, despite our efforts, members of the Armenian political elite -- both the governing coalition and the opposition -- are still unwilling to compromise. Given limited public support for a referendum and unrealistically high voter participation thresholds, it is difficult to envisage a scenario that produces the approximately 730,000 votes required to pass the referendum. In 2002, President Kocharian mustered only 500,000 votes, amid serious voting irregularities, to win his second term in office.

EVANS